



Column by [David Silverstein](#)

## Beware of the Idea Killers – Part II

In my last column, I asked the question, “Are you an idea killer,” and I talked about the dangers of being one. This month I want to talk to you about how to spot idea killers—and how to tell if you’re one yourself.

The challenge we face in answering these questions is the unknown. None of us has a crystal ball. It’s all well and fine to look in the rear view mirror and say, “hey, why did I pass on that idea.” But at the time, it seemed like the right thing to do and while we all have 20/20 hindsight, we don’t all have the time to pursue every idea that comes along. So despite the dangers, we must dismiss some, if not many, new ideas.

So the goal is not to start chasing every hair-brained scheme that comes along, but it’s also not to summarily dismiss them all out of hand.

Perhaps the most important skill idea evaluators (i.e., business leaders) need to develop is humility. What seems like a hair-brained scheme to you actually makes sense to someone else. Have you ever slowed down for a minute to ask why? After all, someone else conceived the idea, developed it to some extent and had the courage to bring it to you. Is it at least possible—for even just a little—that it could be a good idea? Is it at least possible that your first gut reaction could be wrong? Is it possible that your instincts could be off? Is it possible that your own preferences and interests aren’t actually representative of your customers? I could ask dozens more questions, but you get the point . . . is it possible?

To admit that something is possible, even when your instincts tell you it isn’t, requires a great deal of humility. But ask yourself another question: What paradigm am I living in that tells me this idea is a loser? Is there another paradigm that might change my position? What paradigm is the idea-originator living in, and is that paradigm closer to that of our customers than mine? Open your mind.

Once we learn to open our minds—and it takes time and practice—we start to see many more possibilities. All of a sudden, there are ideas out there worth taking a second look at, worth investigating more deeply and worth an initial pursuit.

The next step is equally hard—deciding how far to take an idea and when to kill it if it made it past the first step of deeming it possible. Now that you’ve bought into something that seems possible, the question is can you let it go? It seems paradoxical that first you had to convince yourself to give something that didn’t feel right a chance, and now that you’ve decided to give it a chance, you have to figure out how to let go of it – but that’s the real world of innovation.

The bottom line is recognizing the need for new thinking and new ideas—and that in the past too many ideas have been killed or allowed to die a slow death without getting their due. That’s because there’s never been a brilliant new idea that was obviously a winner from the start; and that, in turn, is because truly brilliant ideas, new thinking and true differentiation come from thoughts that are, well, different. And different is never as comfortable as the sameness to which you’ve become accustomed.